

# Chapter 10

## Children on Bolivian Sugar Cane Plantations

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Children and youths account for half of the eight million people living in Bolivia. The ILO and UNICEF estimated that the sugar cane harvest mobilises almost 10,000 children and adolescents (2006:26). The National Institute of Statistics (INE) and UNICEF estimate that 2,540 children work in the sugar cane harvest (*zafra*) in Santa Cruz (2004:47); OASI, ILO and AECI report 2,619 youths participating in the *zafra* of Tarija (2006:22). In Bermejo, in 2004, there were 2,349 children and adolescents of whom 1,315 were of school-going age (Guevara 2004:4).

Sugar cane is a significant agricultural crop and an important export earner: 30% of the product is exported. The raw sugar cane is processed into sugar and alcohol in large processing plants called *ingenios*. In contrast with the increasing production of sugar cane during the past few years, there have been a decreasing number of harvesters, or *zafreiros*. According to directors and employees of different NGOs, such as OASI and LABOR, the decrease has been from 30,000 harvesters in Santa Cruz in the 1980s to fewer than 10,000 harvesters today, and some sources even suggest that there are only 5,500 *zafreiros* left, including wives, children and *cuartas* (assistants of harvesters) (Universidad Autónoma 'Juan Misael Saracho' 2005). Reasons for this decrease are varied. People have found more and better paid work in other regions, such as mining in the Altiplano and construction of roads in different departments, or may have gone to work in the sugar cane harvest in Argentina where earnings are about twice as much as in Bolivia. However, a significant factor has been the mechanisation of the sugar cane sector (LABOR and AOS 2001; Dávalos 2002).

About 60% of the sugar cane harvesters are temporary migrants. Employers in the sugar cane harvest use a system of advance payments and debt creation to recruit and retain workers. Intermediaries and subcontractors are used to find workers in other regions of the country. They travel into, for example, Tarija and Potosí in the Bolivian highlands, which have large populations of poor, indigenous people (Sharma 2006:3). The new *zafreiros* are contracted in March and are paid a loan in advance. Once the workers have taken advances, they are obliged to work for that subcontractor and do not have the option of giving the money back, or finding work with someone else who

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might pay more. This system involving advanced payments through intermediaries is known as *enganche*, debt bondage. When the *zafreiros* start working in April, they have to pay off their advances first before they can start earning money. They usually get paid every 2 weeks, but some employers pay their harvesters only at the end of the *zafra*, in an attempt to prevent people from leaving before the end of the harvest. The fact that the subcontractor is not officially hired by the company allows the company to claim that it is not responsible for the use of forced labour and that it is not responsible for disrespecting the labour laws. The subcontractor also earns an extraordinary amount of money by running the shop in the *campamento* where he and 'his' *zafreiros* live during the harvest. The prices of the goods sold in these stores are considerably raised and further increase the original debts of the migrant workers.

The places of origin of the migrant workers, usually with a Quechua background, all fall within the poorest regions, with a lack of infrastructure, health and education services and labour opportunities. People who migrate to the sugar cane harvest in Bermejo come from the north of Tarija (66%), Chuquisaca (16%) and Potosí (17%) (Dávalos 2002). Those who migrate to Santa Cruz come from the department of Santa Cruz itself (50%), from Chuquisaca and Potosí (40%) and from Oruro, Tarija and La Paz (10%), where they have small parcels of land on which they grow, for example, potatoes and tomatoes during the rainy period of the year. Because income is highly insufficient for survival, they migrate temporarily to other zones to harvest potatoes or to work in construction jobs. Many, though, choose to work in *zafra*, as this is a more lucrative alternative (Guevara 2004).

## Research Setting

The research was conducted among large plantations (>50 ha) in two sugar cane regions in Bolivia: north of the city of Santa Cruz and in the southern part of the Tarija department (Bermejo). In both regions, the sugar cane harvest starts in May and ends in November.



Tents are simple constructions of branches, palm fronds and tarp

The sugar cane region of Bermejo consists of nine provinces adjacent to the Bermejo River and the Tarija River, which both create borders with Argentina. The sugar cane sector in Bermejo is smaller than in Santa Cruz, in terms of volume, and consists of smaller plantations with a more direct and personalised relationship between harvesters and plantation owners (Garland and Silva-Santisteban 2005). Living conditions, however, are deplorable. In 2004, according to an OASI report, in the whole Bermejo sugar cane region, of the 126 *campamentos*, or harvesters' camps, 33 camps were actually inhabitable (Guevara 2004).

Sugar is one of the most important export products of the Santa Cruz region (Oostra and Malaver 2003). It is estimated that 4,000 *campamentos* are located in the 11 municipalities north of the city of Santa Cruz. Whereas in Bermejo, many plantation owners grow sugar cane on even less than 10 ha, many large plantation owners in the Santa Cruz area own several hundreds or even thousands of hectares of sugar cane land.

In Santa Cruz as well as in Bermejo, the living conditions of children and their families are precarious. Some plantation owners try to improve the living conditions but others, mostly the ones operating in remote zones and/or having small pieces of land and little financial resources, offer their harvesters only the most basic living conditions. Although conditions appear to have been improving, there still is much to be desired.

*Campamento* Los Limones (Santa Cruz) has around 50 families and some 30 single men (adolescents and adults). For 4–6 months, they sleep in a well-constructed building that separates the families from the *solteros* (single men). The *solteros* sleep in bunk beds in a separate wing of the building. A family is allocated about 2 × 2 m by the contractor. The *zafrero*, his wife and his children all sleep together in one bed. Families try to create some privacy by hanging sheets between their own bed and their neighbours'. But obviously, as all families sleep in the same big room, privacy is rare. The wives of the *zafreiros* cook in a covered kitchen area. The camp has a communal space, the *comedor*, where people can share their meals. On rainy days and Sundays, families spend time together on their beds or sit in the *comedor*. As an exception, Los Limones has showers and actual toilets. The primary school closest to the Los Limones camp is about 1.5 km away, and transport of the 30–40 school-going children is arranged by the plantation owner. The children attend the regular school system.

In this camp, children don't fall ill very often; when they do they mostly suffer from diarrhoea. The plantation owner makes sure there are medicines for the people who get sick and medical attention for the ones who get injured. This is an exceptional situation, resulting in the UNICEF representative in Santa Cruz to name the Los Limones camp a 'model camp'.

*Campamento* Los Elechos (Santa Cruz) is a mobile camp that houses about 40 *zafreiros*. The families and single men construct their own tents; sanitary facilities are lacking. The work in the *zafra* takes only about 4 weeks. Upon completion, the harvesters leave Los Elechos and rebuild their camp near another plantation. The tents are open at both front and back ends; animals, like cows, can easily enter and plunder the food reserves. During the night, it can get very cold, and, during the day, it is extremely hot. The families construct their own beds. There are no cooking

facilities and the women build wood fires on the ground. The primary school closest to Los Elechos is also about 1.5 km away from the camp. It actually is not much of a school: it functions only for 2½ days/week. Most families who work here do not have, or do not bring, school-aged children to the camp. Their children are generally much younger. There is no health centre close to the *campamento* in Los Elechos. The little children contract diseases related to the unhygienic conditions in the camp, like diarrhoea, and are often malnourished, which can lead to anaemia.

*Campamento* El Lapacho (Bermejo) houses about 20 *zafreiros*, most of whom have come with their families. The families sleep in brick structures consisting of 3 × 3 m rooms that are shared by two families, and in which they construct their own beds. The single men and their *cuartas* (helpers) share rooms with two or three other people. It has about ten school-aged migrant children. The school lies at 1.5 km from the camp. Every morning, the children walk to school and attend classes until lunch time. During the *zafra*, the teachers become very busy with the extra pupils and their needs; migrant children are at a lower educational level and must do extra work to catch up with the local children. When the males move to another camp, the children of El Lapacho stay in the camp, together with some of the women who stay behind to take care of the children who then can continue in the same school. However, some parents are unwilling to use this solution and take their children along to a next camp where there might be no school. Hygienic conditions are very poor: there is no bathing area, no sanitation and children walk around in dirty clothes and with dirty hands and faces. The area is infested with mosquitoes, and so everyone is covered with bites.



Brick structures in the El Lapacho camp in Bermejo, divided into 3 × 3 m rooms

*Campamento* Entre Ríos, in Tremental (Bermejo), like Los Elechos, generally does not house school-aged children. There were, however, five adolescents of about 15 years old working as *zafreiros*. The families who live in the camp are young couples with small children. The families live in 3 × 3 m wooden structures, in which they construct their own beds. The adolescent singles live separately in similar rooms. The camp has a wooden toilet cabin that consists of a hole in the ground and there is no bathing area; people wash themselves near the well or in the river that passes by the camp a few hundred metres away. None of the young children found in the Entre Ríos *campamento* go to school. They accompany their mothers the whole day. There are many cases of child malnutrition and anaemia because of the unbalanced diet and all types of insect bites. Diseases that are common among little children are respiratory diseases, and intestinal infections, like diarrhoea.

## Work in the Sugar Cane Harvest

The year-round maintenance of sugar cane plantations (fertilisation etc.) is usually done by a few permanent labourers. When the crop is fully grown, roughly between April and November, more labour force is required for the harvest. After the sugar cane has been harvested, it is de-topped and stacked into piles; then it is loaded onto a flatbed truck and brought to the *ingenio* to be further processed into sugar or alcohol. In Bermejo, most of the loading is still done manually, but in Santa Cruz, more and more plantation owners have started using mechanical loaders in recent years.

In addition to mechanisation, a new burning technique has also made the *zafra* less labour intensive. By setting entire plantations alight excess leaves and weeds are burned, leaving just the stalks behind, making cutting a lot easier. It also serves as protection from animals such as snakes, but the smoke caused by the enormous fires has obvious implications for air quality and causes respiratory problems, especially among children. The burning technique also results in less child labour: young children are no longer needed to help peel the leaves from the stalks or to weed between the crops.

Adolescent boys of 14 and older already work as contracted harvesters. The work they do is the same as that of adults. They earn a salary of between 1,000 and 4,000 Bolivianos (€100–400) a month, depending on the volume they manage to cut. They engage in setting the plantations alight, cutting down the sugar cane using a machete, de-topping the stalks, then stacking them into piles, which weigh between 40 and 50 kg. The stacks are then lifted onto their shoulder, and walked towards the flatbed truck where the loader has to climb a wooden ladder to the top of the other piles and deposit his own. This work is extremely heavy, and no younger children are involved.

In Bermejo, the *zafreiros* often bring their own *cuartas*. These helpers are normally the *zafreiro*'s own wife, child, neighbour or other relative. *Cuartas* help with cutting,



stacking and peeling. They don't generally participate with loading the sugar cane, which is done manually in Bermejo, as this work is too heavy for them (if it is a woman or child). *Cuartas* can themselves also hire helpers, often their own children.

Children below the age of 14 rarely participate in the sugar cane harvest in Santa Cruz. The burning technique and mechanisation has led to fewer children working on the plantations. Parents try to leave all their children at home in the care of family members, so that home and school life are disturbed as little as possible. Unfortunately, adequate childcare is not always available, and so still too often, the youngest non-school-going children are brought along to the camps and plantations. These children accompany their mothers all day long and help them with some chores, like fetching water and cleaning, or just playing at their side.



#### **In Bermejo, the harvesters still load the trucks manually**

Children and adolescents aged 12–17, girls as well as boys who are still in school, in Santa Cruz as well as in Bermejo, help their parents as *cuartas* in the sugar cane harvest after school, in the weekends and/or during holidays. These children participate in the different harvesting activities according to their age and sex. School-going children of 11 and 12 years old participate in the same activities as older permanent helpers like cutting, de-topping and stacking sugar cane, after classes or on non-school days. In Bermejo, some of these children (only boys) also participate in the extremely heavy task of manually loading sugar cane onto the flatbed trucks. Eleven-year-old Armando, for example, had recently finished sixth grade in the

Campo Grande school in Bermejo and then started to help his father as a *cuarta* on a daily basis. This meant that he helped cutting sugar cane in the morning and sometimes participated in loading sugar cane in the afternoon or evening, together with other young boys, such as 13-year-old Modesto: 'My parents don't give me money for the work but they buy me clothes and everything'. Armando's father emphasised his desire for his son to continue studying next year; he wouldn't like his son to drop out of school because of the work.

Daysi (12 years), who lives in the Porcelana camp in Bermejo, works as a *cuarta* with her sister:

I came here with my sister and I help her and her husband in the harvest; my sister helps my husband and I help my sister. At the end of the harvest she will pay me, she hasn't paid me anything yet. I don't know how much it will be, I have no idea. But anyway, I help her to earn money for back home.

Usually children and youths working as *cuartas* earn a salary between 300 and 800 Bolivianos (€30–80) per month, but especially the ones who work with their family members tend to be unaware of their earnings and might not even earn anything at all. Helping out family members is perceived as family work for which minors don't need to be rewarded individually. Doña Delia, who also lives in the Porcelana camp in Bermejo, for example, told me that her 14-year-old son Daniel works as a *cuarta* with his father and doesn't receive a salary: 'If he needs anything like clothes or something, he gets it from us, but we don't pay him. We just don't have enough money'.

In Bermejo, like in Santa Cruz, women and adolescent girls do the household chores in the camps, even though they may work as *cuartas* too. Girls are never hired as full-time contracted harvesters because the work is considered too heavy for women. Women in the sugar cane harvest are expected to run the household and related activities. *Zafreiros* who are not accompanied by their wives may bring along a female *cuarta* to cook and wash his clothes, in addition to her tasks in the harvest. Girls usually accompany their brothers to work as *cuarta*, or both of them work as *cuartas*, but the sister is the one who cooks and washes. Aminta (14) mentioned: 'I cook for my brothers and my uncle and for three other guys of their group. I am doing this for the first time and it is okay; I earn a bit of money'. The *solteros* need someone to cook for them. A *pensionista* is such a person; she gets money from a group of men to do groceries and cook for them. Girls from 14 years onwards, for example, 15-year-old Nina, are hired to do this work:

I work for 10 *zafreiros*; my brother is the contractor so the 10 men also work for my brother. They pay me 150 Bolivianos (1.50 euro) each per 15 days. But I also have to do the shopping with this money so in the end I earn just a little bit, something like 200, 300 or 400 Bolivianos (2, 3 or 4 euro) in that entire period.

The *pensionistas*' work is hard; they have to get up early to cook for others, they have to go on errands when others have a day off, they have to cook large amounts on a simple wood fire out in the open, they have to work in a subservient position relative to their male clients and must have a strong character to survive within the machismo environment.

The *zafreiros* work in clusters of two or four people and are paid as a group, according to the amount of cane that they have cut; this is normally about 17 or 18 Bolivianos (€1.70/1.80) per tonne of cut sugar cane. Experienced, very hard-working *zafreiros* can possibly cut about 8 t/day, but young inexperienced harvesters might cut only 2 t. A 16-year-old *zafretero* commented:

I have just started working here a few days ago; I am still working quite slowly. Last year I also worked in the sugar cane harvest and went home with about 2000 Bolivianos



**Eight-year-old girl helping her mother to cut sugar cane on a Saturday morning, Arrozales, Bermejo**

(200 Euro) at the end of the *zafra*, that is after they had deducted our advances and other costs. It is not much for working like slaves for 5 months.

Even though many deductions are made from their salary (advance, food costs, travel expenses, etc.), the adolescents earn more than they would at home; unfortunately, it is not enough to last them the rest of the year. The rest of the year they work their own land, or in other sectors such as construction, mining or agriculture, elsewhere in Bolivia or in Argentina.

Although a small group of adolescents only works at the plantations during school holidays, most adolescents in Santa Cruz work 6 days a week, throughout the *zafra*. On working days, they get up at 4:00 am and have a cup of tea and a piece of bread. Around 4:30 am, the group of *zafreiros* heads to the field, either walking



or driven by their contractor on the wagon behind the tractor, and start cutting the sugar cane at sunrise. The adolescents work all morning without any real breaks; they only stop every once in a while to drink some water, smoke a cigarette, chew coca leaves and sharpen their machetes.

At noon, the *pensionista* will have lunch ready, which she will either bring to the field or serve at the camp. The lunch breaks take an hour to an hour and a half. After the lunch break, the harvesters work the whole afternoon. Around 5/6 pm, they stop working and return to the *campamento*, have dinner and socialise until 8 or 9 pm, at which point everybody goes to sleep. Sometimes though, the loading machine is available only in the middle of the night and the *zafreiros* will get up to use it.

In addition to the long hours and the high workload, the adolescents are exposed to an extreme climate with high temperatures, of which Raul (15) commented: 'During the first hours, the work is all right, but when it gets later, from around 9 am, it is so hot, it drives me crazy'. All workers try to protect themselves from the heat by wearing hats, drinking a lot of water and starting work very early. However, when a lot of work has to be done, they work through the hottest hours as well. Edwin (17) first worked in the sugar cane harvest in Bermejo when he was 14: 'It was terrible because the work is bad and it was so hot and the mosquitoes never left us alone and the work makes you totally black because it is so dirty. All my clothes were just never to be worn again after a few months'.

Because of the heat the *zafreiros* would prefer to work in sleeveless shirts, but the sugar cane leaves are sharp, thus protective layers are needed. Most adolescent *zafreiros* work on sandals made from car tires, which leave their feet exposed to injuries. Even though cutting sugar cane all day causes hands to blister, none of the adolescent workers use gloves. A 16-year-old boy argued: 'I think it doesn't help to put on gloves: they don't help because they get holes within 1 day's work. I prefer to just get hard skin on my hands'.

*Cuartas* work 6 days a week. Female *cuartas* have to get up before the others to prepare breakfast. After breakfast, the *zafreiros* and their *cuartas* head to the fields. Although most children help on days that they don't have school – accompanying their parents, combining their work with rest and play – quite a large number work full-time. A young boy in El Lapacho (11) commented: 'I work every day with my mother. She is a *cuarta* for my father and I help her because I have nothing else to do'. The youngest children, those under 7, are present on the plantation, but don't actively participate; however, from 7 onwards, they tend to help their parents, as the research diaries note:

This morning we left the camp by tractor at 4:30 to head to the fields. It was extremely cold, especially because we were sitting on top of the wagon in the open air. Everybody was wrapped up in blankets; harvesters, their wives, the *cuartas*, and all the children. When we arrived at the fields, people started burning the crops to get warm. Then we started cutting the sugar cane at a plot which had been burned the day before. The youngest children, up to 6 years old, stayed at the tractor and played on top of the wagon; parents had to take them with them because there was nobody in the camp who could watch them. Nobody in particular took notice of them although they could easily fall off the wagon. My neighbour girl from the camp, Yasmin, had her 7-month-old baby with her and just left him at the side of the path where she was working. All other children, of 7 years and older were cutting sugar cane alongside their parents, the whole morning.

## The Impact on Children

The plantation workers, and their children, live in a very unhealthy environment. Both children who work at the plantations and those who simply accompany their parents, are exposed to leishmaniasis, tuberculosis, scabies and lice, which is mainly on account of the overcrowded accommodations with poor hygiene and sanitation. The heat exacerbates the presence of insects and the general weak state of health and malnourishment make children more vulnerable to infections. According to 20-year-old Valentina, one of the harvester's wives in Santa Cruz, many accidents and illnesses occur because of the working and living conditions. She thinks women have fewer health problems:

We don't really have health problems but the men and the boys do; they cut themselves with the machete, they faint because of the heat or fall off the truck when they are loading sugar cane. Only yesterday, one of the boys had his eye scratched by a leaf of the sugar cane. That really hurts ...it happened to me once too. It may destroy your eyesight.

The work they do is very strenuous and risky, but not many serious incidents were reported. They appear to have become accustomed to serious accidents and do not consider them noteworthy or requiring medical treatment. Many children and adolescents who work as *cuartas* in the *zafra* reported machete cuts. As the machetes are sharpened several times a day, the cuts in the hands, arms, feet or legs tend to be deep. Nelson (8), a school-going child in Tremental who helps his parents at the sugar cane plantations during the afternoon after school, recalls: 'Once when I was working with my mother, I cut myself in the leg. It wasn't very bad but it hurt a lot and a lot of blood came out of the wound. They put something around it, but it kept hurting for many days. The machete was very sharp'. Although cuts on hands, arms, feet or legs are common, few children are brought into health centres to seek treatment. Reaching a doctor or a health centre is difficult, and wounds are expected to heal themselves anyway. Roger (13), from the Campo Grande camp in Bermejo, said: 'I cut my toe about two weeks ago. It hurt and blood came out but I didn't go to the health centre, I just left it to heal by itself. Now it is okay'.

Children also reported falling from the flat-bed wagons, or from the stairs they climb while loading sugar cane. This happened to Ramón (17):

When I was 15, I was working in Porcelana, close to Bermejo, where we went loading early in the morning. It was raining quite heavily but we just went to work as usual. The stairs were very slippery because of the rain so I slipped holding this whole stack of sugar cane on my shoulder, and I fell down. My back hurt a lot, I guess something had broken but I didn't go to a doctor. I just rested for three days and then I went back to work again although it still hurt. Although it happened some years ago, I have continued working and my back is still hurting.

Because cutting, de-topping, stacking and loading sugar cane are heavy tasks, extreme tiredness is the most prevalent consequence of the work. Especially in the last months of the harvest, the workers complain about their bodies becoming weaker and they feel more tired and want to return to their homes. Many acknowledge

that the work physically wears them out. Francisco (15), from the Okinawa camp in Santa Cruz, complained: 'I am really tired of the work and I have become much thinner since I came to the harvest; the heavy work really makes one lose weight'. Mesquil (16) commented on how hard he found the work: 'I didn't think that the work would be so hard. It is so hot and I am thirsty all the time. The first very day, my arm and my back started hurting'. After a week of work, his hands had been completely rubbed raw and were covered with open blisters. Mesquil considered leaving after a few days, but he changed his mind and tries to ignore health implications for economic reasons: 'Although the work is exhausting and my hands hurt, I am thinking of staying at least the whole month to earn a bit of money'.

The youngest children, under 7, are usually left in the *campamentos* and stay with their mothers. In some *campamentos* in Santa Cruz and Bermejo, there are PAN centres close to or even inside the camps. A PAN centre is a governmental child shelter for children of 0–5 years old. Some PAN centres only provide lunch for the children, while others entertain children all day. In the Campo Grande camp, the wife of the contractor, who permanently lives in the camp, gets a small salary to cook lunch for the youngest children in the camp every day, but there is no funding for hiring an educator to keep the children busy. In another camp, Porcelana, also close to Bermejo, two women are hired to take care of the children of the *campamento* during the day, while another woman cooks for them. The PAN centres are a significant solution for mothers with small children, but the centres are few and poorly equipped.

In both sugar cane regions, children are usually put into school at about 7 years old, if there is one available close by. In Arrozales, Porcelana and the Campo Grande in Bermejo, there are schools close to the camps and almost all primary-school-aged children attend classes. The fact that they help their parents after school and in the weekends, however, leaves them little time to do their homework. In the Okinawa 1 and Chorobi camps in Santa Cruz, on the other hand, the children are not in school because the parents consider the schools to be too far away.

Although most children of school-going age are enrolled during the *zafra* and may not actually engage in the labour activities, their education is nevertheless affected. Work in the sugar cane harvest is migratory work. Some families move from camp to camp during the harvest, and so their children move from school to school. The teachers in the sugar cane regions have difficulties with the fluctuating numbers of students. One teacher of the school opposite the Primero de Mayo camp in Arrozales, Bermejo mentioned:

We are three teachers throughout the entire year but the number of children attending classes varies all the time. Before the harvest there are 27 pupils from the community [of Arrozales] but when the harvest starts there are 80 to 90 children.

Teachers thus have to cope with varying numbers of pupils; this number varies almost per week as the harvesting families come and go at different moments and children from different camps attend the same schools. Moving around makes school attendance extremely difficult, and the experience can be extremely upsetting. A mother of an 8-year-old boy and a baby girl commented:

When we leave this place, in about two weeks, we will probably go to Playa Ancha. It is difficult for the children there because we don't know if there is a school, so maybe we won't take them with us and leave them in this camp with some mothers. But if we take them with us we will spend some time finding them a new school.

Often parents leave some of their children at home with family members so they can continue going to school. Doña Carla (Okinawa 1 camp in Santa Cruz) explained:

My oldest three children are at home. A few days ago I went to my village to go get my youngest daughter; she is four years old and attends a child day care but that finished last week. Now she stays with me here in the camp while the other three are still in school in Gutierrez. They are staying with my brother.

When people don't have anyone they can leave their children with, they have to take them with them to the harvest. Teachers at home complain that when children return they have fallen behind, whilst teachers in the *zafra* regions complain of the poor educational levels of the migrant children when they arrive.

According to the director of the school in Campo Grande, school-going children start working as *half-cuartas* from fourth grade onwards, which means from about the age of 9: 'They attend our school in the morning and work in the afternoon. They come to school with wounds all over their hands'.

There are also children who are not enrolled at all during the *zafra*. In order to be enrolled, parents need to present an official transfer paper from the hometown school, which, for various reasons, they may fail to do, as happened to Nestor (11): 'I am not in school because my parents didn't bring the papers from my other school'. Forgetting papers does not automatically lead to work; normally a decision about work will have been made before hand. Modesto (13) claimed: 'my father took me from school when I was eleven so I could help him growing potatoes, peas and cereals, but also I didn't want to continue studying myself'. Modesto accompanies his father on the fields in their hometown, as well as in the sugar cane harvest.

Adolescent boys working as contracted harvesters, as well as youths working as *cuartas*, mainly work for economic reasons. They come from poor regions with few job opportunities, and the sugar cane harvest provides a more or less stable income for 4–6 months a year. Héctor (15, from the Campo Grande camp in Bermejo) said:

I came here with a neighbour from my community and I work as his *cuarta*. I earn 600 Bolivianos [60 Euro] per month but usually I only get paid what I need; at the end of the harvest I will get the rest of my money. I am the youngest of 8 brothers and sisters; they are in my village and the money I earn will be very helpful.

When boys are about 14–15 years old, they are considered old enough to contribute to the family income. If they work fulltime, they have usually only finished primary school until the fifth grade. Only some of them have started secondary school, but dropped out before finishing. They usually, like Hector (15), do not perceive further study as a real option because they cannot afford the enrolment fees or book costs: 'I finished eighth grade last year and then I quit going to school. I would still like to continue studying in high school but there is no money in my family for me to study. Maybe I'll have to pay for it myself'. Some, however, dislike working in the sugar cane harvest so much that

their wish of continuing to study has grown stronger. Most adolescents like the fact that they have started to earn money or simply don't feel like studying anymore. Uriel (15), in the Campo Grande camp in Bermejo, is a good example of many boys who don't desire going back to school because they have become used to working and earning money for themselves or their families. Uriel explained:

In the harvest here, I work with my father. He doesn't really pay me but just gives me clothes and stuff. I studied until fourth grade: I left when I was eleven. I am not going to study anymore because the higher levels are too far away and I don't want to go anymore. I just want to work. In my hometown I also work: I grow vegetables and take care of the sheep, the goats, the pigs and the cows.

Earning money, once they have reached a certain age, remains a big attraction. Once that process has started, it is difficult to turn back to the school benches. These adolescents don't consider themselves children anymore. The work in the *zafra* adds to their becoming an adult and leaving their childhood behind. Rene (15) in El Lapacho: 'I stopped going to school when I was in third grade. I have always worked since that time; I just wanted to earn money. Therefore I like to work in the *zafra*: I can earn much money here in a short time. Going back to school is no option for me: I am too old'.

In Bermejo, the use of the *cuarta* system makes the *zafra* more like a family business, in which adolescent family members also participate. In Santa Cruz, adolescents participating in the *zafra* work outside of the family realm. In Santa Cruz, adolescents of 14 years onwards work accompanied by friends or relatives and are part of the group of *solteros*. In Bermejo, adolescent *cuartas* of 12 years and older work within or without the family realm; they either assist their parents, or work as *cuartas* with their uncles, neighbours or other acquaintances.

For children of school-going age (6–12), the *zafra* can be quite impacting. It either means that they travel with their parents to the *zafra* region where they try to find a school and work outside school hours and in the weekends, or that they stay in their hometowns to continue classes and wait for their parents to come home. This can take as long as 6 months if their parents stay for the whole *zafra* period. Either option can be emotionally and educationally disrupting. The wife of one of the *zafreiros* in Los Elechos commented:

I took my two youngest children with me and left the other three at home, the oldest is 9 years old. They go to school so I don't want to take them with us to the *zafra*. I left them with my mother so they are alright, but it hurts me to leave them there for such a long time. But what can we do?

Leaving children behind can be extremely stressful; some of the wives commented that they would return home before their husbands, just to be reunited with their children sooner. Children in the sugar cane harvest, although together with their parents, miss the rest of their family. Like one 13-year-old girl who helps her aunt in cleaning and cooking in the El Rincón *campamento* mentioned: "I kind of like it here but I prefer to stay at home because there I have lots of family". Thus, either way, staying in the hometown or travelling with parents to the *zafra* means a separation from part of the family for a while.



## After the Interventions

Fieldwork, carried out in the sugar cane regions of Santa Cruz and Bermejo during October and November 2008, allowed for a comparison with the situation as observed by the ILO during its rapid evaluation in 2002. The places visited in the Santa Cruz sugar cane harvest – Las Gamas and Chira/Nueva Esperanza – are located in the Warnes province. Those visited in Bermejo – Arrozales, Porcelana and Campo Grande – are located in the central sugar cane region. In 2002, the situation was as follows (ILO 2002a):

Whereas the acreage under sugar cane was increasing, the number of harvesters, because of a growing mechanisation, was decreasing. In Santa Cruz, 22% of the 32,000 harvesters were children and adolescents; in Bermejo, 25% of the 5500 harvesters were children and adolescents. The youngest children were 9 years old. About 70% of the boys and girls participating in the sugar cane harvest in Bermejo worked as *cuartas* while the rest of the girls combined their household chores with working as a *cuarta* and the rest of the boys mostly peeled the leaves off the sugar cane. In the Santa Cruz sugar cane region, 77.8% of the boys cut sugar cane, 11.1% combined this work with household chores, 11.1% did weeding; among the girls, 37.5% did household chores combined with cutting sugar cane, 20.8% cut sugar cane, 4.2% did weeding and 8.3% were only attending school. In Tarija, there was a concentration of youths of 13 to 16 years old working in the harvest, while in Santa Cruz the majority was between 16 and 18 years old.

Those percentages have since gone down, at least when looking at fulltime workers. The harvesters confirmed having noticed a diminishment in the number of youths participating in the harvest compared with a few years ago. According to doña Mercedes from the Campo Grande camp in Bermejo, mother of four children:

My daughter didn't want to come to the harvest. She joined us once but she found the work horrible, "much too heavy and too hot" she said. So she decided that she wants to study; she is in 8th grade now and wants to go to high school. In general there are fewer children in the camp. Last year there were more, but like my daughter other children also want to study. They sometimes just want to go to school so they stay in their homes.

Apparently, the children and their parents have become more aware of the importance of schooling and more children are staying in their hometowns to continue studying or attending classes in the harvest region. Luisiana (15, Campo Grande camp) also stated that there are fewer children on the plantations than before. According to her this primarily has to do with youths wanting to study: 'Also from my town, some children have stayed there because they want to finish school first'. Luisiana herself also wants to finish eighth grade next year and then move on to high school; she couldn't finish primary school this year because she had to help her brother in the harvest.

Of the fulltime harvesters in Santa Cruz about 10–15% are minors. In Bermejo, the percentage is slightly higher. The current educational situation has, however, improved significantly. According to the ILO, only 8.3% of the girls and none of the boys participating in the sugar cane harvest in Santa Cruz were in school. In Bermejo, neither boys nor girls from the migrant camps were attending classes (Dávalos 2002). Currently, most children under 12 years old are attending primary school. Still, attendance depends very much on whether there is a school close to the camp. In the central sugar cane zone in Bermejo, almost all children under 12

are in school; in the more remote zones of Santa Cruz, where schools are far away, young children continue to be out-of-school.

Although numbers appear to have gone down, youngsters are still present on the plantations, and still run all types of health risks and are actually injured from time to time. In addition, their right to education is hampered because the school-going children who participate in the harvest experience an interruption of their school year while the older ones who work fulltime have no time to attend school at all.

In Santa Cruz, LABOR and the Federation of Harvesters carried out a project from August 2006 to July 2008. The awareness-raising activities seem to have had good results, as the leaders are well informed about the topic and seem to entirely agree with the idea of eliminating child labour from the sector. When visiting the harvester camps, the Federation members talk about the issue with the harvesters and their families. The radio program broadcasted by the Federation of Harvesters in Montero, called *La voz del zafrero* (*The Voice of the Harvester*), is quite popular among the harvesters. Many families listen regularly to the program, which is a daily half-hour broadcast. The program seems an effective way to reach many people about issues like child labour. Twenty-year-old Valentina (Chorobi camp) commented: 'They talk about how we should have good camps, good earnings and that children shouldn't work in the sugar cane harvest'. Also Manuel (13, Okinawa 1 camp) and his parents listen to the program on their radio. Manuel's mother, doña Nely, explained that she likes the program and that they learn from it:

During the program they talk about children who work in the harvest and that it is prohibited because it is dangerous for them. Then my son tells me "you see mum, I shouldn't be working: it is prohibited". But I think there is always a reason why kids are working. It is easy to say that children can't work in the harvest, but that I had no option because we do not have the money to send him to school.

The 'Programme to Strengthen the Municipal Schools in the Sugar Cane Harvest', was started in April 2007. Together with the government, UNICEF employs teachers and establishes schools to educate the children of the *zafreros* who live in fixed as well as in mobile camps. UNICEF also arranges levelling classes for those children who have fallen behind and psychological assistance is offered at the schools. The main obstacle to this project has been the unwillingness of teachers to work in remote schools, especially mobile ones, because this requires living in the camps. Teachers of mobile schools have to move with the harvesters whenever needed. The levelling classes are said to be doing well, but this year, because of delayed funding, they have not been as active.

Workshops about labour rights and child labour were held in a total of 21 harvester camps, with over 1,300 participants, according to internal sources. The former director of LABOR, Carlos Camargo, claimed that levels of child labour in the sugar cane harvest have decreased: 'There are about 50% fewer children in the harvest than a few years ago; people are more aware that children shouldn't work'. In practice, however, the effect may have been less significant, as this research indicates, and few people in the camps recalled having taken part in any workshops.

LABOR and the Federation of Harvesters state that they have also visited the harvesters' places of origin; this allowed the organisations to coordinate activities

in the regions to raise awareness about the issue of child labour and urge parents to leave their children at home instead of taking them to the camps. The organisations claim that fewer people migrate these days because the initiation of agricultural projects in the region has decreased the need for people to participate in the sugar cane harvest. Agrarian production is said to have improved by, for example, installing an irrigation system and by planting apple and peach trees and cactus fruit plants. Despite the success of the program, the potential resource pool for recruiting migrant labour is huge and recruitment may simply be shifting to other areas.

An important aspect of the LABOR project was the tripartite dialogue between sugar cane harvesters, sugar cane producers and authorities on the improvement of labour conditions for adult harvesters, in order to create an adequate environment to decrease the number of children participating in the harvest. This has led to some agreements. For example, a harvesters' labour contract was drafted that takes into account international agreements; a collective agreement was signed, which includes a fixed salary for the harvesters and the prohibition of child labour.

In Bermejo, the ILO financed the CCIMCAT pilot project 'Strengthening of Participative Citizenship of Rural Women'<sup>1</sup> in 2007, and aimed to eradicate child labour by stimulating the migrant women and other poor women to generate their own income with, for example, the production of marmalade and *chancaca* (a sweet sauce based on unrefined sugar) and rearing chicken. The pilot project has ended, and although in some places the women continue the new activities, in other places, the women have stopped working. Doña Ruth remarked: 'I liked it very much when they gave us chickens to breed, but it was a pity when many of them died of pest. [CCIMCAT] did give the chickens some medicine, but still many died'. Selling marmalade turned out to be difficult; according to Doña Mariana from the Porcelana camp, the women only earned about 18 Bolivianos (€1.80) each because not all the marmalade could be sold. The project would have to find sustainability and run for many years before having a significant impact on child labour.

The project also organised creative workshops about children's rights. Some children from the Porcelana camp, for example, recalled decorating sponges, which the CCIMCAT educators used to demonstrate proper hygiene behaviour. One 12-year-old boy mentioned:

They explained how we should wash ourselves and then we decorated the sponges. It was fun to make them but I don't have the sponge anymore. They also told us about child labour and that children shouldn't work in the sugar cane harvest and that children should go to school. I liked the workshops but I also didn't like it because there were almost only girls participating.

Financed by UNICEF, the Ministry of Labour implemented extra lessons, called *aulas de apoyo*, for primary school pupils in various migrant camps, during the harvest of 2007. Four educators organised classes for the pupils in different camps of the central zone in Bermejo. Some children in the Primero de Mayo camp, who

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<sup>1</sup>Proyecto de fortalecimiento de participación ciudadana de mujeres rurales.

had been in the same camp the year before as well, remembered the classes. They commented that for a few months one or two women had come to the camp and that they had spent the day, doing subjects such as mathematics and art. This activity may have been the most direct way to eradicate child labour, as it offers a safe place to pass the time and to study, while their parents are working. This works particularly well for children who are still in school and who would otherwise accompany their parents to the fields on non-school days. Still, other children preferred to help their parents in the fields, especially since they had been accustomed to doing so. The *aula de apoyo* had to be made attractive by doing many games, drawings and sports activities so that the children wouldn't get bored and keep coming rather than joining the rest of the neighbourhood in the plantations.

During the first months of the sugar cane harvest of 2008, OASI supported the Federation of Harvesters' negotiations for an increase in the price per tonne of harvested sugar cane. Because the plantation owners were not forthcoming, the harvesters started blockades and held demonstrations. The OASI team supported the harvesters' actions. After some 6 weeks of actions and negotiations, an agreement was reached. The support of OASI to the Federation of Harvesters in their struggle for a better salary is an example of improving labour conditions for adults, indirectly contributing to the eradication of child labour, because better income for parents diminishes the need for their children to add to the family income.

## Conclusion

Children who migrate to the sugar cane regions, despite some recent improvements, live with their families in overcrowded camps with generally poor living and hygiene conditions. The conditions in which the children and adolescents work are harsh. The climate is extreme, and the work is exhausting and hazardous. Few *zafreiros* use protective clothing during their work. Adolescents from the age of 14 onwards engage in all harvest related activities, such as burning, cutting, de-topping and (in Bermejo) loading. They work 6 days a week, cutting the sugar cane with a machete, from early in the morning until the end of the afternoon, and earn between €3 and 4 a day. All *zafreiros* and *cuartas*, including the younger children, suffer from machete cuts, abrasions, blisters, heat exhaustion, insect, spider or snake bites, backaches and even broken bones. Health centres are often far away from the camps, and so wounds or other health problems are left to heal themselves. In Bermejo most of the children under 12 help their parents cut sugar cane with a machete, even if they attend school during the weekdays. Although children under 12 do not work in Santa Cruz, they nevertheless suffer from the miserable living conditions in the camps.

Although most school-going children attend school near the camps, the migration is disruptive to their education. Sometimes, children are left at home with relatives, or parents stop travelling to the *zafra* when their children start attending school, but when parents have no such choice, they bring their young children,

either school-going or not, with them to the camps. Some families even move to several camps during one *zafra* season and each time the child has to adapt to a new situation and education suffers. Participation in the *zafra* familiarises adolescents with earning money and they often drop out of education as a result. A majority of the adolescents do not consider further schooling an option. For many adolescent *zafreiros*, working in the *zafra* marks a transition period into adulthood. Although most adolescents have finished primary school, they quickly turn to work, as their hometowns rarely offer secondary education.

Different strategies have been implemented in the various sugar cane regions of Santa Cruz and Bermejo, aiming to eradicate child labour from the sector. In general, all the separate interventions have their own specific impact on the problem of child labour, and substantial progress has been made, particularly with regards to young children, but the impact on adolescents is still lacking. There is certainly not one type of intervention that would work best; a combination of complementary strategies is needed.

The strategy of raising awareness about labour rights appeared to be an important one in stimulating harvesters to struggle for their own rights and understand the importance of education. The reasons for youths to participate in the sugar cane harvest vary among the different age groups, and so interventions have to be tailored to suit the needs of each group. Because school-going children work during non-school days or periods, projects to eradicate child labour among school-going children in the sector should focus on finding other pastimes for children during these periods.

The most difficult group to reach directly remains the group of adolescents who work as *cuartas* or contracted harvesters. Because their motive to work in the harvest is economic, the alternative requires income generation as well.

Despite improvements, the harvesters rarely mentioned having been part of a project to improve living and working conditions and/or projects against child labour. Projects may have been in operation, but people may not have been actively involved and they thus do not seem to recollect. Yet, the incidence of child labour seems to have decreased. To what extent the different projects actually have reduced the number of children participating in the sugar cane harvest is hard to measure, because patterns tend to change slowly and projects often lack continuity. A decrease also may have been caused by other intervening factors.

As long as children continue to be present at the plantations, there is a danger of them becoming involved in child labour activities or living in an unsuitable environment. In order to make sure that the risks of such involvement are reduced, it would be better if children were not physically present in this sector at all.

The following recommendations are advised:

- More personnel and financial resources should be made available for inspections in the migrant camps and on the plantations.
- The prohibition of child labour should be accompanied by the active exploration and implementation of alternatives for youths, such as free and vocational schooling; because adolescents work in the harvest for economic reasons, interventions



should offer youths economic alternatives or schooling alternatives that are free of all costs, including opportunity costs.

- Projects should be better coordinated, complimentary and of a long-term nature. Because interventions require awareness raising and changes of life patterns of the harvesters, their results might only become apparent after 5 years or more.
- It remains important to organise awareness raising activities for the harvesters in the camps about child labour, labour rights and the importance of education, but probably more important is the provision of child-friendly facilities, particularly schools, since the presence of a school has been a crucial factor in reducing child labour.